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# Review of Competency based education and training: a world perspective

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## **Competency Based Education and Training: a world perspective**

ANTONIO ARGUELLES & ANDREW GONCZI (eds) 2000

Mexico: Conalep/Noriega 229pp (paperback)

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This collection of articles designed to provide a world perspective on competency based education and training (CBET) can be regarded as paralleling the globalising forces which are currently shaping the economic and employment conditions to which CBET is said to be a response. The joint editors, Arguelles – a Mexican government official responsible for commercial and industrial development – and Gonczi - Dean of the increasingly influential University of Technology in Sydney which was involved in Mexican and Central American developments in this sphere – have gathered together a range of informative and illuminating studies of the growth of CBET throughout the world.

In the introductory chapter the editors note that the:

educational framework for addressing the deficiencies of VET has become, in an increasing number of countries, competency based education. This can be defined as education based on outcomes and pre-determined standards, on what students can do.. (p.9).

This suggests educational – or, at least, VET factors – were the principal motivators of change though Gonczi, in his own chapter, claims that ‘the motivation for the adoption of a standards approach...to vocational education and training was economic rather than educational’; indeed, it was this that ‘led to a conflict about the educational value of such a policy’(p.18).

Gonczi’s opening chapter – systematic, coherent and thoroughly documented – provides a useful background for later chapters exploring the application of CBET to VET systems in Mexico, Australia, Costa Rica, France (interestingly written in French) and New Zealand, in addition to accounts of implementation in manufacturing and law in Australia and coal-mining in South Africa. There is also a generic – and theoretically wide-ranging – analysis of the relationships between skill, expertise and competence in complex work contexts provided by Phillip Capper, the Director of the Centre for Research in Work, Education and Business in New Zealand.

The various contributors' knowledge about CBET and its applications is formidable, as is their practical experience of implementing systems in different work contexts. Another area of similarity amongst the writers in this volume is a general (sometimes uncritical) commitment to VET reform along CBET lines. The most generous way of explaining such a positive commitment to CBET – in the face of widespread weaknesses and serious problems of implementation *noted by proponents themselves* – is by means of Gramsci's epithet 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'.

A good example of this tendency is provided by Arguelles' account of the way in which the Mexican government – with World Bank support – went about modernising VET in the early 1990s. In response to severe recession in 1985 the Mexican government 'decided to confront the challenges of globalisation and open its economy to international competition'(p.41). This resulted in the 1994 Project for the Modernization of Education and Training which was underpinned by a national system of labour competencies. What makes this scenario interesting is the fact that – in the face of the same global competition and acknowledgement of poor quality training and low skill levels – many other countries are also seeking to upgrade VET systems (in the UK, under the lifelong learning banner).

Was the Mexican experiment successful? Well, no, not really. As in the UK model pioneered by the former NCVQ, industrial involvement – though claimed to be central and crucial by designers of competency standards - was minimal. The introduction of CBET in Mexico was 'largely a government sponsored initiative which, at the time, had not been broadly supported by industry'. The upshot was that at the end of the pilot projects 'many companies still do not have a very clear understanding of labour competencies and their importance'(p.59). A key question therefore, is how a system which claims to define competencies in terms of industrial needs can possibly succeed without industrial interest and involvement.

There are parallels here, of course, with the NCVQ experience which also made similarly unsubstantiated claims about industrial representation on lead bodies and which also mistakenly tried to transfer a system for assessing workplace competences (the heart and point of all CBET systems) to general educational and professional courses. In spite of the positive gloss placed on the Mexican experiment, the project was doomed to repeat the mistakes of the NCVQ. The process noted the 'difficulty of conceptualising academic subjects in terms of core competencies' and the fact that CBET could not be 'reconciled with official policy concerning the exercise of professions' (pp.58-9). General academic and professional education has nothing whatsoever to gain from CBET and the Mexican

government (and, indeed, the World Bank) might have saved themselves a lot of time and expense by applying the model only in the domain to which it belongs and is appropriate – the workplace. It would also have been worth taking note of the widely admired VET systems operating in France and Germany which have deliberately eschewed competence models in favour of systems based on general educational principles.

Applied appropriately, imaginatively and flexibly, competence models *may* help to improve training in specific companies, as the chapters by Gilling & Graham on Australian manufacturing, Hager on Australian legal professions and Rademeyer on the South African mining industry serve to illustrate. CBET, however, is self-evidently no panacea for the deficiencies of VET systems anywhere. Nor is it at all well suited to produce employees who display the multi-skilled flexibility to meet global competition in the post-Fordist world economy. Having admitted the fact that the ‘conception of competence is a contested notion’ and the difficulties of developing competency standards, Gonczi observes that there:

is also the problem...that small business was reluctant to specify the competencies needed in their industry due to the fear of competitors...and that industrial survival in the competitive workplace depends on innovative solutions to improvement which is the antithesis of prescribed procedures (as laid out in competency standards). We are left with the conclusion that the *foundation of the CBET system is shaky at best* (p.26, italics added).

Given all this – together with ‘serious problems of implementation’ (p.27) and a lack of ‘scholarly literature on the impact of CBET on economic development’(p.34) – we are bound to wonder why so much time, money and effort should be spent on CBET systems. The answer, of course, needs to take into account political face-saving, huge vested interests and, most significantly, the academic industry and vast CBET territory (of which UTS is the undisputed capital!) now covered by the phenomenon. It is definitely *not* ‘too early to determine the effectiveness of CBET and the extent to which it has produced the skilled, flexible and critical workforce that studies have suggested are increasingly needed in the contemporary economy’ (p.36). CBET has patently failed to achieve any of these objectives in any of the countries in which it has been implemented and it should now be abandoned as a model for the reform of VET systems.

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